

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: January 15, 2015

Agenda Item: Tendoy Bighorn Sheep Permission to Move to Research Facility

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 Minutes

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Background: At the December meeting the Department informed the commission of the concept of depopulating a struggling population of bighorn sheep to make way for restocking of the same range. Bighorn sheep of the Tendoy Mountains herd in Hunting District 315 have been experiencing very low lamb recruitment since the all-age pneumonia die offs of 1993 and 1997 in spite of augmentations in 1997, 2001 and 2012 that were done in the hopes of speeding up population recovery. A 2012 disease survey identified disease pathogens endemic in this herd. The Tendoy Mountains herd is therefore a suitable candidate for a depopulation and restocking effort. An Environmental Assessment (EA) will be done on the project. These sheep can be valuable as research animals, and research facilities in Washington, Wyoming, Colorado and South Dakota have been contacted. To date Washington and Wyoming do not need more animals and we have not heard back from Colorado. South Dakota State University (SDSU) in Brookings is currently doing research on pneumonia in bighorn sheep and may be interested in about ten (10) animals from the Tendoy. If Colorado or some other research facility expresses interest we would also like to be able to move sheep there. It is unlikely that any one facility would request more than 10 to 20 sheep. If funding can be found and the contracting process expedited this could happen as early as mid-January or February. If the depopulation project goes forward then removal of research animals would aid that effort. If issues identified in the EA or other circumstance prevent a depopulation/restocking project then the testing done on the research animals will aid in future management of the Tendoy and other herds. SDSU will not pay for capturing the sheep, but will pay for all the testing and transport to Brookings.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Because the concept of depopulating a struggling population for subsequent restocking was only recently presented there has been limited discussion with the public to date. The local biologist, the R3 wildlife manager and the game management bureau chief have been in contact with some local sportsmen's groups, the Montana Chapter of the Sheep Foundation, and others about the idea of depopulating the Tendoy Mountains herd for later restocking and there has been general support for the idea. We have not, however, specifically discussed this proposal for moving sheep to a research facility. Also, in addition to public comment taken at the January 15th meeting it will go out for public comment through 5 p.m., Jan. 23, 2015. Final commission consideration will be taken up at the February meeting.

Alternatives and Analysis: If the proposed movement of bighorns to a research facility is not adopted there could be serious consequences to the hunter possessing the either-sex limited draw license if the possible future action of using public hunting to depopulate the Tendoy Mountains bighorn sheep herd for subsequent restocking were to take place.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends that the commission adopt the above proposal to move bighorn sheep from the Tendoy Mountains to research facilities, if requested, as presented by the Department.

Proposed Motion: I move to adopt the proposed movement of bighorn sheep from the Tendoy Mountains to research facilities, if requested, as presented by the Department.